

Screen of Kings: Royal art and power in Ming China. By Craig Clunas. 248 pp. incl. 62 col. + 30 b. & w. ill. (Reaktion Books, London, 2013), £35. ISBN 978-1-78023-103-7.

Reviewed by SHANE McCAUSLAND

CRAIG CLUNAS'S LATEST book is an elegant monograph, 'a history of a sort' (p.195) about the extremely little-known, if also much disparaged cultural world of the provincial members of the Ming royal family (1368-1644). These people were the so-called *fanwang* ('fence kings/princes') who were enfeoffed in regional courts, or appanages, to act as 'a fence and a screen' (chapter one) around the person of the Ming emperor and his immediate family in the capitals, Nanjing and latterly Beijing. The book presents, for both a scholarly audience and the general reader (and given the unfamiliarity of the topic, most readers will feel like the latter, regardless of their degree of specialisation), much of the research Clunas has carried out in preparation for the major exhibition on the Ming dynasty to be mounted at the British Museum, London, this autumn (18th September to 4th January 2015).

At the heart of Clunas's book is a meticulous reconstruction of the material culture associated with the *fanwang*, brought to life with some extant objects but also, extensively and painstakingly, through texts. One set of texts consists of primary sources culled from a large Ming corpus of writings, for the most part edited and transmitted by the scholar-official class, that were rarely complimentary about and indeed mostly hostile towards members of the aristocracy, when the latter were not actually close to invisible (and its women doubly invisible). Another is the modern historiography in which the *fanwang*, until now, have fared little better. This is 'deliberately revisionist' history, as Clunas observes (p.9) and, despite the apparently royal focus, it deals predominantly with the local rather than the national, going against the 'statist bias' of modern historiography (p.57).

Clunas engages most closely with the world of provincial royal culture by neatly mapping categories of material culture to four of these regional courts. A rare extant hanging scroll of calligraphy by Zhu Xintian, King Jian of Jin (d.1575), is an entrée, in chapter three, to the world of collecting, patronage and dissemination of model writings by the Ming *fanwang*, about which Clunas argues that '[k]ingly courts did not simply reflect innovation generated elsewhere, but were themselves sites of cultural newness in the Ming, to a far greater degree than we have been willing to recognize' (p.77). Chapter four explores painting in connection with the King of Zhou; in chapter five jewels are linked with the King of Liang; and in chapter six bronzes are paired with the King of Lu.

Clunas invests his energy in opening up the agency of all these cultural objects, not especially as visual forms but as material artefacts.

He is wary of any approach that would seek to understand the essence of Chinese culture as one that would assume a timeless human communality. He is at his most expansive when engaging in comparative historicism, which he does excellently, for instance where he fleshes out the dimensions of historical and cultural asymmetry and counters formative but uncritical ideas about Ming China, particularly royal privilege, for example, such as 'oriental despotism' (especially chapter one).

It is perhaps in his study of painting (or more correctly pictures) where Clunas focuses most effectively on pervasive running questions about the *raison d'être* of the *fanwang* and the value of culture in their provincial worlds. It is in a preface (by an otherwise unknown, non-aristocratic writer) to a late Ming woodblock-printed book, *Great Synthesis of Models of Painting (Hua fa da cheng)*, that we read: 'His Present Majesty [i.e., the emperor in Beijing] governs the world through [Confucian virtues of] humaneness and filial piety, and the several appanages receive this model (*feng fa*) with diligence, themselves wishing through literature and art to provide a model for the world . . . (*yi wen yi fa tian xia*)' (p.136). Containing printed versions of paintings by members of cadet branches of the Kings of Lu living in the mid-sixteenth century, this printed volume is seen as 'a case in which aristocrats can be shown to have acted as 'early adopters' of significant cultural developments [such as] the publication of manuals of painting techniques, which would proliferate from the seventeenth century onwards' (p.135). Clunas makes a compelling case for seeing the various *fanwang* as 'early adopters' of cultural practices in Ming China. It is a testament to how little we still know about them – a situation acknowledged even at the conclusion (p.196) – that it is unclear how far they might also have been initiators of those practices.

Wall Paintings of Eton. By Emily Howe, Henrietta McBurney, David Park, Stephen Rickerby and Lisa Shekede. 192 pp. incl. 210 col. ill. (Scala, London, 2012), £35. ISBN 978-1-85759-787-5.

Reviewed by LUCY WRAPSON

IT IS RARE and welcome to find a lavish and well-produced publication dealing with the subject of late medieval wall painting in England. *Wall Paintings of Eton* is a two-part book, most of which deals with Eton's well-known and highly significant fifteenth-century Marian cycle in the School Chapel. Part two of the book discusses a unique early sixteenth-century school scene discovered in the Head Master's Chambers in 2005.

The chapel paintings originally comprised thirty-two scenes of the *Miracles of the Virgin*, arranged in two registers along the north and south walls of the chapel, painted between

1477 and 1487. Andrew Martindale called them arguably the most important surviving late medieval mural scheme in northern Europe. This publication draws together previous research, outlining the known physical history of the paintings and adding a thorough technical study. Interesting new insights include a novel interpretation of the division of labour, or indeed workshops, in the chapel, based on layer structures as well as style. Emily Howe has been able to take the question of division of labour and hands further than previously, with the support of evidence from paint cross sections, multispectral imaging and inspection on site. Other questions are more vexed, and she concludes that the nationality of the painters, whether 'Flemish' (for which read a number of possible Low Countries origins) or English is 'impossible to say' given the material and technological consistency of wall painting throughout northern Europe.

Some of the technical findings would have benefited from being placed within a wider context. While the use of lead-tin yellow, described here as 'unusual', has not often been analysed in late medieval wall paintings, it is a standard pigment on fifteenth- and sixteenth-century English rood-screen paintings on wood. That wall painters were also panel painters is well established. Although further analysis is required to assess lead-tin yellow's prevalence in wall paintings, visual evidence suggests it is more widespread at this later date than on earlier medieval schemes. Equally, as Howe herself suggests, the pigment madder may be found to have been more widely used as more wall paintings are analysed. This shows the need for a late medieval equivalent to Helen Howard's fundamental work on twelfth- to fourteenth-century pigments, so that studies such as this can be more securely grounded in a technological tradition. Perhaps the most notable material discovery is in the use of varied and mixed binding media, such as the inclusion of egg with oil and also the use of walnut as well as linseed oil. This confirms the complexity of binding media in late medieval wall painting and hints at the sophistication with which painters manipulated paint media for desired effects.

The second part of the book describes the exciting discovery in 2005 of a wall painting in the Head Master's Chambers. Subsequent conservation work in 2006-07 by Stephen



56. Detail from *A master and schoolboys*, by an anonymous painter. c.1520. Mural. (Head Master's Chambers, Eton College).